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Religious Studies Ban To Be Lifted

Bills would prohibit discrimination against religious studies

LANSING – Seeking to end the practice of discrimination against certain types of academic study, Sen. Jason Allen is spearheading a package of bills to lift the restriction prohibiting students of theology, divinity or religious education majors from receiving scholarship or grant money from the state of Michigan.

“Current Michigan law prohibits students from participating in five grant and scholarship programs if they want to study theology or a related field,” Allen said. “Teresa Becker, a constituent of mine, is one of those students who does not have equal access to the more than \$242 million awarded yearly to students in grants and scholarships because she chose to study theology.”

Earlier this week Federal District Judge George Caram Steeh entered an order prohibiting the state from enforcing the statute preventing Becker from receiving scholarship money. Becker had filed a lawsuit against the state earlier this year.

“Barring students from receiving state scholarships and disallowing them from following their dream is not how we as a state should be acting,” Allen said.

The five-bill package, introduced last Thursday, would affect five programs: The Michigan Merit Scholarship; the Michigan Educational Opportunity Grant; the Michigan Competitive Scholarship; the Part-time Independent Student Grant; and the state’s Tuition Grant programs.

Allen said that changing the law would also help the state avoid a future potential law suits, as the current language can be deemed a violation of Article I, Sec. 4 of the State Constitution.

The scholarships are funded out of the general fund. The budget for the next fiscal year as it currently stands allocates \$252,609,400 towards scholarship and grants. Of that \$252 million, \$4.4 million comes from federal dollars and \$138.3 million goes to the Michigan Merit Scholarship from the Tobacco Settlement.

“This is not a church-state issue, it is an issue of educational freedom,” Allen said, referring to the Constitution’s ban on the former and support of the latter. “For the state to be truly committed to education for everyone, this academic issue needs to be addressed.”